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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ALGIERS 000427

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STATE ALSO FOR DRL/IRF WARREN COFSKY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/13/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [CASC](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: CHRISTIAN CHURCHES WRESTLE WITH GOVERNMENT

REF: A. ALGIERS 333

[1](#)B. ALGIERS 334

[1](#)C. 06 ALGIERS 606

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Using a 2006 law, the Algerian government closed some Protestant churches in March amidst constant reporting by Algerian Arabic-language papers that was intensely hostile towards the Christian community in general and towards alleged Protestant proselytizing in particular. The Algerian Society for Christian Books and the Protestant Church of Algiers have confirmed to us that about a dozen churches were closed, at least temporarily, in the mountains east of Algiers (Kabylie region). There are reports that some preachers have been summoned into police stations to explain why they were holding unauthorized services. Adding to the sense of concern among the Christian community, long-time Algeria resident and now retired Methodist minister Hugh Johnson had to depart Algeria (ref A) when his residence permit was cancelled. Recent difficulties have not been limited to Christians alone, as the representative of the Jewish community in Algeria reported that he has recently received death threats. The Ambassador on April 12 cautioned a member of (Islamist) Prime Minister Belkhadem's kitchen cabinet that closing churches would quickly become a sensitive bilateral issue if the GoA was not forthcoming in approving applications from churches and easing restrictions on visas. This Belkhadem advisor warned the Ambassador that the church issue was highly sensitive on the Algerian side because of Algerian fears that Western countries would use Christian communities as a wedge to gain more influence in Algeria. In the last two weeks, the local media clamor over evangelization has abated significantly, at least temporarily, but the problem of new churches being able to operate here is by no means finished. END SUMMARY.

WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED IN MY NAME

[1](#)2. (C) In an April 8 meeting, Ali Khedri of the Algerian Society for Christian Books (ASCB) confirmed press reports that some churches have been informed in writing that they had to close. Khedri said that 16 churches in Algeria had been closed by the Algerian government and noted that the order to close was effective immediately. (Note: Khedri was talking specifically about buildings dedicated to Christian worship. Online sources have cited closure numbers ranging from ten to 26, though some of these may refer to "house

churches." End note.) The information, he said, was provided to him by Mustapha Krim, the president of the Protestant Church of Algeria (PCA).

13. (C) Some affected churches closed their doors for only one or two weeks, Khedri continued. He acknowledged that the act of reopening a closed church without authorization could be interpreted by the government as illegal and posited that a court order compelling church closures might come. The March 31 edition of the online French-language newspaper Tout sur l'Algerie quoted Mustapha Krim saying that "all of the communities in the Protestant Church of Algeria" had decided to reopen. Khedri told us that since reopening, the churches have held services but that in some cases church leaders have been taken to police stations repeatedly and questioned. Roger Correvon, pastor of the Protestant Church of Algiers, told us April 13 that in the Kabylie province of Tizi Ouzou a declared PCA member church had been closed recently by the authorities. Church members eventually reopened the church and the leadership of the church was taken to the police station and told to stop activities.

RENDER UNTO CAESAR

14. (C) Correvon commented to us April 13 that between 1963 and 2006 the Algerian government recognized one single association -- the Protestant Church of Algeria -- as the national representative of the various Protestant denominations in the country. According to Correvon, during this time period PCA membership alone was sufficient for an individual church to be considered legally recognized. Ordinance 06-03, which came into effect in February 2006 (ref

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B), began to require individual churches to register at the level of the wilaya (province). Correvon noted that the change was not communicated in writing. Prior to the change, he said, a number of independent Protestant churches existed openly. With the passage of Ordinance 06-03, several of them sought to join the PCA out of fear.

15. (C) Khedri told us that the churches that have been ordered closed recently are legally part of the PCA under the organization's bylaws. This fact, he asserted, means that the closed churches were not operating illegally or secretly. He also said that each time a church joins the PCA the organization notifies the Algerian government, but he added that the PCA has never received formal acknowledgment from the government that new churches have been registered. Every two years the PCA holds an "extraordinary general assembly" during which new member churches are considered and added. According to Khedri, the list of churches seeking to join the PCA is long and the next assembly is slated for later this month.

16. (C) Since the adoption of Ordinance 06-03 in 2006, Correvon said, some churches have tried to register in their wilayas but have been unsuccessful. He claimed that to date no church registration attempt has been accepted at the wilaya level. According to Correvon, there is no set list of what is required for a church to be registered under Ordinance 06-03. Rather, each time a church tries to register, its representatives are told that their file is incomplete or that they have incorrectly completed their paperwork. Khedri also told us that officials from one church in the town of Ouadhia (Tizi Ouzou) had tried repeatedly to register with the wali (governor), but were told by him that "instructions came from above" concerning the closures and that he "did not know how to handle registering" them. Correvon's Protestant Church of Algiers is preparing a file to present to the wilaya of Algiers, but he noted that there is no consensus within the PCA about how to handle the current situation. Some members want to try to register while others believe they are already in compliance with the law.

CONVERSION SENSITIVITY

17. (C) Much of the Algerian media's attention has focused on the alleged increasing number of Muslims converting to Christianity, particularly in the Kabylie region. Khedri said that some individuals have converted from Islam to Christianity, but he was clear in saying that the number was not high, as suggested by newspapers. Khedri also said that the Algerian government was focusing on evangelical churches because they were populated by Algerians, not foreigners. He dismissed claims that foreign involvement with Algerian evangelicals was high. Through our local employees we contacted an imam in the Tizi Ouzou region who confirmed that conversions in his area had taken place, but he was unable to provide numbers.

PROBLEMS FOR OTHER MEN OF THE CLOTH

18. (C) In addition to the church closings, we are also monitoring the case of Catholic priest Pierre Wallez. According to press reports, in January Father Wallez and an Algerian doctor were detained for having prayed with Christian African immigrants near the town of Maghnia, in western Algeria. Catholic Archbishop of Algiers Henri Teissier told us April 14 that Wallez was charged with celebrating a mass outside of a church (i.e., not in a designated place of worship, which violates Ordinance 06-03), though the archbishop asserted that Wallez merely prayed with the Africans. The Algerian doctor was charged with providing medicines from a public health center without permission to the immigrants. The archbishop asserted to us that the medicines were in fact provided by the Catholic church. Father Wallez was given a one-year suspended prison sentence and released; the doctor received a two-year prison sentence and was released pending appeal. An appellate ruling in both cases is expected April 19.

HIT THE ROAD, JACK

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19. (C) Archbishop Teissier told Ambassador March 24 that retired Methodist minister Hugh Johnson departed Algeria on March 26 after his appeal to remain in Algeria was rejected by the country's Council of State. (We have asked Johnson's lawyer, Rachid Kahar, for a meeting, but he has not responded to our request.) Johnson confirmed to us by email on April 2 that he was no longer in Algeria. Roger Correvon told us that Johnson had gone to Marseille, France, where he was seeking medical attention.

110. (C) Following Johnson's departure, several newspapers quoted Religious Affairs Minister Bouabdellah Ghoulamallah on March 31 as saying that Johnson had been ordered to leave Algeria for reasons linked to the "security of the state." Ghoulamallah's remarks reflected a shift from a statement a month earlier that Johnson was being expelled simply because his residence permit was expiring. In spite of this apparent hardening of Ghoulamallah's position, he has maintained consistently to the press that the Ministry of Interior, rather than Religious Affairs, took the decision to expel Johnson. Ghoulamallah has also consistently ruled out Johnson's involvement in any evangelical activities, saying he had not participated in any such campaign.

ALGERIAN GOV'T RESPONSE: EQUAL TREATMENT

111. (U) The main GoA response we hear both in public and private is that the GoA is also regulating mosque activities, although under a law that predates the 2006 law for non-Muslim worship. A March 24 report in el-Khabar referred

to a Ministry of Interior report that 70 mosques in the Kabylie were closed or abandoned either because of lack of Muslim worshippers or lack of government authorizations. According to el-Khabar, the Interior Ministry report also warned that proselytizing was a threat to Algerian social cohesion and recommended closely monitoring priests coming to Algeria on the pretext of cultural programs.

¶12. (C) Ambassador on April 12 cautioned a member of (Islamist) Prime Minister Belkhadem's kitchen cabinet that closing churches would quickly become a sensitive bilateral issue if the GoA was not forthcoming in approving applications for authorizations from churches and easing restrictions on visas. This advisor warned the Ambassador that the church issue was highly sensitive on the Algerian side because of Algerian fears that Western countries would use Christian communities as a wedge to insert more influence in Algeria. She even claimed that one of the motivations behind Algerian media attacks on the Embassy in March stemmed from the suspicions Belkhadem and others in the Algerian government harbored after the Embassy began raising religious freedom in its February conversations. (Comment: This remark about the media campaign surprised us, as no other source has claimed this. End comment.)

P.S. JEWS HAVE PROBLEMS, TOO

¶13. (C) Fredrick Belaiche (protect), the representative of the Jewish community in Algeria, told us on April 12 that he had recently received two death threats, one by phone and one by letter. Both threats were anonymous and were received at his office. According to Belaiche, the threats mentioned his Jewish identity. Belaiche told us that he contacted the police after receiving the phone call, but no action was taken by them. With the arrival of the anonymous letter last week, however, the police responded and placed his office under surveillance. Belaiche said they will also monitor phone calls to his office. According to Belaiche, the police said that the responsible parties are unlikely to be terrorists because the typical terrorist does not announce his intentions in advance. In any case, Belaiche said, his house has been under police surveillance for a long time.

COMMENT: CONNECTING THE DOTS

¶14. (C) The Algerian government and media are sensitive to Western criticism that the GoA is harassing or persecuting

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Christians. Notably, best-selling Arabic-language daily el-Khabar reported on April 13 that Algeria's image was suffering from criticism in European papers such as El Pais of the Algerian moves to close churches. In the wake of Algeria's bitter colonial experience, there is genuine paranoia here about Western influence coming into Algeria through churches; we hear it occasionally in public forums we attend. Belkhadem recognizes how much of a political winner this church issue is for him among the conservative majority in Algerian society, and he has government leakers to the Algerian press, our contacts tell us, aim to use the church issue to distract popular attention from the socioeconomic ills of daily life. It may also serve to distract the attention of the political opposition to efforts to secure a third term for President Bouteflika. Much of the action is taking place around Tizi Ouzou, a region whose people historically are fiercely independent. We have asked for meetings with the Religious Affairs ministry several times between September 2007 and April 2008 to urge the government apply the 2006 law fairly but noticeably they are declining to see us.

FORD